COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Costly printer a prince, but no king

Picture this: a printer for your personal computer with two print heads, both a letter-quality daisy wheel for business letters and a dot-matrix head for fast drafts and internal reports.

Called the Twinriter 5 from Brother International Corp., Piscataway, N.J., it lists for $1,295 plus $169 for a tractor feeder or $325 for an automatic cut-sheet feeder.

The idea of putting two print heads in one printer is magnificent. And it certainly took a great deal of technical wizardry for the feat to be accomplished. It's the only such device I'm aware of on the market.

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The key question, however, is whether it's convenient and cost-effective for typical business use, especially considering the fact that new laser printers are now available for less than $2,000.

To my surprise, I discovered in testing the Twinriter 5 that it was even better than my workhorse Hewlett-Packard laser printer for some tasks. And this leads me to think that it might be preferable to laser printers in some low-volume business situations. Here's why:

✔ The Twinriter 5 can be set up to use to either dot matrix or letter-quality printers, depending upon which is used the most in your office. Then, to use the other, you simply insert a font change code at the head of the document you want to print. You may need help setting it up, but once it's up and running, switching back and forth is easy.

✔ The Twinriter 5 is quick and easy to use, and the first page begins printing faster than with a laser printer. When you need hard copy in a hurry, and it doesn't have to be fancy, you have the speed of the dot matrix. And if you want originally typed letters, you can't beat a daisy wheel.

✔ You can switch back and forth between print heads in the same document. For some, the value of the Twinriter 5 is not just the novelty of having two printers in one machine, but in having the ability to print dot-matrix graphics in a letter-quality document.

✔ It can print on envelopes and odd-size paper, which is cumbersome with a laser printer, and even handle oversize items that are impossible with a laser.

On the down side, the machine is relatively expensive and slow compared with other stand-alone dot-matrix or daisy-wheel printers, and uses very expensive ribbons.

At $1,620, including the cut-sheet feeder, the Twinriter 5 is one printer for more than the price of two. Similar quality dot matrix printers can be purchased for $200 to $300 these days, and Brother International itself makes letter-quality printers in the $700 range. It's hard to justify paying such a high premium just to get them both in the same box. And if you're willing to pay that extra $600, why not make it $900 and buy one of the many laser printers that now retail for less than $2,000? With the laser printers, a cut-sheet feeder is not necessary, and the output is faster.

Furthermore, the Twinriter 5's ribbons are terribly expensive, costing from $18 to $25 apiece.

Despite the negatives, some people prefer to send out old-fashioned "typed" documents that have a more personalized feel than what the laser printers produce.

The bottom line: If your office needs or wants letter-quality capacity, but also could make use of a speedy dot-matrix printer with graphics ability — and you don't mind the high price — Twinriter 5 is for you. It's a prince of a product, but in my office the laser printer is still the king.

Hillel Segal is an independent computer consultant and author of the monthly Executive Computing Newsletter, published by the Association of Computer Users, P.O. Box 9003, Boulder 80301.